The Firm of Girdlestone

BY

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The approach to the offices of Girdlestone and Co. was not a very dignified one, nor would the uninitiated who traversed it form any conception of the commercial prosperity of the firm in question. Close to the corner of a broad and busy street, within a couple of hundred yards of Fenchurch street Station, a narrow doorway opens into a long white-washed passage. On one side of this is a brass plate with the inscription "Girdlestone and Co., African Merchants," and above is a curious hieroglyphic supposed to represent a human hand in the act of pointing. Following the guidance of this somewhat ghostly emblem, the wayfarer finds himself in a small square yard surrounded by doors, upon one of which the name of the firm reappears in large white letters, with the word "push" printed beneath it. If he follows this laconic invitation he will make his way into a long, low apartment, which is the counting-house of the African traders.

On the afternoon of which we speak things were quiet at the offices. The line of pigeon holes in the wire curtain was deserted by the public, though the linoleum covered floor bore abundant traces of a busy morning. Misty London light shone hazily through the glazed windows and cast dark shadows in the corners. On a high perch in the background a weary-faced, elderly man, with muttering lips and tapping fingers, cast up endless lines of figures. Beneath him, in front of two long shining mahogany desks, half a score of young men, with bent heads and stooping shoulders, appeared to be riding furiously, neck and neck, in the race for life. Any habitue of a London office might have deduced from their relentless energy and incorruptible diligence that they were under the eyes of some member of the firm.

The member in question was a broad shouldered, bullnecked young man, who leaned against the marble mantelpiece, turning over the pages of an almanac, and taking from time to time a stealthy peep over the top of it at the toilers around him. Command was imprinted in every line of his strong, square-set face and erect, powerful frame. Above the medium size, with a vast spread of shoulder, a broad aggressive jaw, and bright bold glance, his whole pose and expression spoke of resolution pushed to the verge of obstinacy. There was something classical in the regular olive tinted features and black, crisp, curling hair fitting tightly to the well rounded head. Yet, though classical, there was an absence of spirituality. It was rather the profile of one of those Roman emperors, splendid in its animal strength but lacking those subtle softnesses of eye and mouth which speak of an inner life. The heavy gold chain across the waistcoat and the bright stone which blazed upon the fingers were the natural compliment of the sensuous lip and curving chin. Such was Ezra, the only child of John Girdlestone, and the heir to the whole of his vast business. Little wonder that those who had an eye to the future bent over their ledgers and worked with a vigor calculated to attract the attention of the junior partner, and to impress him with a due sense of their enthusiastic regard for the interests of the firm.

It was speedily apparent, however, that the young gentleman's estimate of their services was not entirely based upon their present performance. With his eyes still fixed upon the almanac and a sardonic smile upon his dark face he uttered a single word:

"Parker!"

A flaxen-haired clerk, perched at the further end of the high glistening desk gave a violent start, and looked up with a scared face.

"Well, Parker, who won?" asked the junior partner

"Won, sir!" the youth stammered.

"Yes, who won!" repeated his employer.

"I hardly understand you, sir," the clerk said, growing very red and confused.

"Oh, yes you do, Parker," young Girdlestone remarked, tapping his almanac sharply with the paper knife. "You were playing odd man out with Robson and Perkins when I came in from lunch. As I presume you were at it all the time I was away, I have a natural curiosity to know who won.

The three unhappy clerks fixed their eyes upon their ledgers to avoid the sarcastic gaze of their employer. He went on in the same quiet tones:

"You gentlemen draw about thirty shillings a week from the firm. I believe I am right in my figures, Mr. Gilray," addressing the senior clerk seated at the high solitary desk apart from the others. "Yes, I thought so. Now, odd man out is, no doubt, a very harmless and fascinating game, but you can hardly expect us to encourage it so far as to pay so much an hour for the privilege of having it played in our counting-house. I shall, therefore, recommend my father to deduct five shillings from the sum which each of you will receive upon Saturday. That will cover the time which you have devoted to your own amusements during the week."

He paused, and the three culprits were beginning to cool down and congratulate themselves, when he began again.

"You will see, Mr. Gilray, that this deduction is made," he said, "and at the same time I beg that you will deduct ten shillings from your own salary since as senior clerk the responsibility of keeping order in this room in the absence of your employers rests with you, and you appear to have neglected it. I trust you will look to this, Mr. Gilray."

"Yes, sir" the senior clerk answered meekly. He was an elderly man with a large family, and the lost ten shillings would make a difference to the Sunday dinner. There was nothing for it but to bow to the inevitable, and his little pinched face assumed an expression of gentle resignation. How he was to keep his ten young subordiates in order, however, was a problem which vexed him sorely.

The junior partner was silent, and the remaining clerks were working uneasily, not exactly knowing whether they might not presently be included in the indictment. Their fears were terminated, however, by the sharp sound of a table gong and the appearance of a boy with the announcement that Mr. Girdlestone would like a moment's conversation with Mr. Ezra. The latter gave a keen glance at his subjects and withdrew into the back office, a disappearance which was hailed by ten pens being thrown into the air and deftly caught again, while as many derisive and triumphant young men mocked at the imploring efforts of old Gilray in the interests of law and order.

The sanctum of Mr. John Girdlestone was approached by two doors, one of oak with groundless panels, and the other covered with green baize. The room itself was small, but lofty, and the walls were ornamented by numerous sections of ships stuck upon long flat boards, very much as the remains of fossil fish are exhibited in museums. There were also several photographs of the various vessels belonging to the firm, together with maps, charts, and lists of sailings innumerable. Above the fireplace was a large water-color painting of the barque Belinda as she appeared when on a reef to the north of Cape Palmas. An inscription beneath this work of art announced that it had been painted by the second officer and presented by him to the head of the firm. It was generally rumored that the merchants had lost heavily over this disaster, and there was some who quoted it as an instance of Girdlestone's habitual strength of mind that he should decorate his wall with so melancholy a souvenir. This view of the matter did not appear to command itself to a flippant member of Lloyd's agency, who contrived to intimate by a dexterous use of his left eyelid and right forefinger, that the vessel may not have been so much under-insured nor the loss to the firm so enormous as was commonly reported.

John Girdelstone, as he sat at his square office table waiting for his son, was undeniably a remarkable-looking man. For good or for evil no weak character lay beneath that hard angular face, with the strongly marked features and deep set eyes. He was clean shaven, save for an iron grey fringe of ragged whisker under each ear, which blended with the grizzled hair above. So self-contained hard set, and immutable was his expression that it was impossible to read anything from it except sternness and resolution, qualities which are as likely to be associated with the highest natures as with the most dangerous. It may have been on account of this ambiguity of expression that the world's estimate of the old merchant was a very varying one. He was known to be a fanatic in religion, a purist in morals, and a man of the strictest commercial integrity. Yet there were some few who looked askance at him, and none, save one, who could apply the word friend to him.

He rose and stood with his back to the fire as his son entered. He was so tall that he towered above the younger man, but the latter's square and compact frame made him, apart from the difference of age, the stronger man.

The young man had dropped the air of sarcasm which he found was most effective with the clerks, and had resumed his natural manner which was harsh and brusque.

"What's up?" he asked, dropping back into a chair, and jingling the loose coins in his trouser pockets.

"There's news of the Black Eagle," his father answered. "She is reported from Madeira."

"Ah!" cried the junior partner eagerly. "What luck?"

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"She is full, or nearly so, according to Captain Hamilton Miggs' report."

"I wonder Miggs was able to send a report at all, and I wonder still more that you should put any faith in it," his son said impatiently. "The fellow is never sober."

"Miggs is a good seaman, and popular on the coast. He may indulge at times, but we all have our failings. Here is the list vouched for by our agent. Six hundred barrels of palm oil——"

"Oil is down today," the other interrupted.

"It will rise before the Black Eagle arrives," the merchant rejoined confidentally. "Then he has palm nuts in bulk, gum, ebony, skins, cochineal, and ivory."

The young man gave a whistle of satisfaction. "Not bad for old Miggs! Ivory is at a fancy figure.

"We are sorely in need of a few good voyages," Girdlestone remarked, "for things have been very slack of late. There is one very sad piece of intelligence here which takes away the satisfaction which we might otherwise feel. Why are seamen such improvident dogs?"

His father held up his white hand deprecatingly. "I wish," he said, "you would treat these subjects with more reverence. What could there be sadder than that the bread-winner of a family should be cut off? It has grieved me more than I can tell."

"When you intend to pension the wives?" Ezra said, with a sly smile.

"By no means," his father returned with decision. "Girdlestone and Co. are not an insurance office. The laborer is worthy of his hire, but when his work in this world is over, his family must fall upon what has been saved by his industry and thrift. It would be a dangerous precedent for us to allow pensions to the wives of these sailors for it would deprive the others of all motive for laying their money up, and would indirectly encourage vice and dissipation."

Ezra laughed, and continued to rattle his silver and keys.

"It is not upon this matter that I wanted to speak to you," Girdlestone continued. "It has, however, always been my practice to prefer matters of business to private affairs, however pressing. John Harston is said to be dying, and he has sent a message to me saying that he wishes to see me. It is inconvenient for me to leave the office just now, but I feel that it is my Christian duty to obey a summons. I wish you, therefore, to look after things until I return."

"I can hardy believe that the news is true," Ezra said, in astonishment. "There must be some mistake. Why, I spoke to him on 'Change last Monday."

"It is very sudden," his father answered, taking his broad-brimmed hat from a peg. "There is no doubt about the fact, however. The doctor says that there is very little hope that he will survive until evening. It is a case of malignant typhoid fever."

"You are very old friends?" Ezra remarked, looking thoughfully at his father.

"I have known him since we were boys together," the other replied, with a slight dry cough, which was the highest note of his limited emotional gamut. Your mother, Ezra, died upon the very day that Harston's wife gave birth to this daughter of his seventeen years ago. Mrs. Harston only survived a few days. I have heard him say that, perhaps, we should also go together. We are in the hands of a higher Power, however, and it seems that one shall be taken and another left."

"How will the money go if the doctors are right?" Ezra asked keenly.

"Every penny to the girl," the merchant answered. "She will be an heiress. There are no other relations that I know of, except the Dimsdales, and they have a fair fortune of their own. But I must go."

"By the way, malignant typhoid is very catching, is it not?"

"So they say," the merchant said quietly, and strode off through the counting house. Ezra Girdlestone remained behind, stretching his legs in front of the office fire. "The governor is a hard nail," he soliloquized, as he stared down into the glow. "Depend upon it, though, he feels this more than he shows. Why, it's the only friend he ever had in the world—or ever will have, in all probability. However, it's no business of mine," with which comforting reflection he began to whistle as he turned over the pages of the private day book of the firm.

It is possible that his son's surmise was right, and that the gaunt, unemotional African merchant carried a sore heart behind a composed exterior as he hailed a hansom and drove out to his friend's house at Fulham. He and Harston had been charity schoolboys together, and had roughed it together, risen together, and prospered together. When John Girdlestone was a rawboned lad and Harston a chubby faced urchin, the latter had come to look upon the other as his champion and guide. There are some minds which are parasitic in their nature. Alone they have little vitality, but they love to settle upon some stronger intellect, from which they may borrow their emotions and conclusions at second hand. A strong, vigorous brain collects around it in time many others whose mental processes are a feeble imitation of its own. Thus, it came to pass that as the years rolled on, Harston learned to lean more and more upon his old schoolfellow, grafting many of his stern peculiarities upon his own simple vacuous nature, until he became a strange parody of the original. To him Girdlestone was the ideal man, Giddlestone's ways the correct ways, and Girdlestone's opinions the weightiest of all opinions. Forty years of this undeviating fidelity must, however he might conceal it, have made an impression upon the feelings of the elder man.

Harston, by incessant attention to business and extreme parsimony, had succeeded in founding an export trading concern. In this he had followed the example of his friend. There was no fear of their interests ever coming into collision, as his operations were confined to the Mediterranean. The firm grew and prospered, until Harston began to be looked upon as a warm man in the City circles. His only child was Kate, a girl of seventeen. There were no other near relatives save Dr. Dimsdale, a prosperous West end physician. No wonder that Ezra Girdlestone's active business mind and perhaps that of his father, too, should speculate as to the disposal of the fortune of the dying man.

Girdlestone pushed open the iron gate and strode down the gravel walk which led to his friend's house. A bright summer sun shining out of a cloudless heaven bathed the green lawn and the many colored flowerbeds in its golden light. The air, the leaves, the birds, all spoke of life. It was hard to think that death was closing its grip upon him who owned them all. A plump little gentleman in black was just descending the steps.

"Well, doctor," the merchant asked, "how is your patient?"

"You've not come with the intention of seeing him, have you?" the doctor asked glancing up with some curiosity at the grey face and overhanging eyebdows of the merchant.

"Yes, I'm going up to him now."

"It is a most virulent case of typhoid. He may die in an hour or he may live until nightfall, but nothing can save him. He will hardly recognize you, I fear, and you can do no good. It is most infectious, and you are incurring a needless danger. I should strongly recommend you not to go."

"Why, you've just come down from him yourself doctor," John Girdlestone remarked.

"Ah, I'm there in the way of duty."

"So am I," said the visitor decisively, and passing up the stone steps of the entrance strode into the hall. There was a large sitting-room upon the ground floor, through the open door of which the visitor saw a light which arrested him for a moment. A young girl was sitting in a recess near the window, with her little supple figure bent forward, and her hands clasped at the back of her head, while the elbows rested upon a small table in front of her. Her suberb brown hair fell in a thick wave on either side over her white round arms, and the graceful curve of her beautiful neck might have furnished a sculptor with study for a mourning Madonna. The doctor had just broken his sad tidings to her, and she was still in the first paroxysm of her grief—a grief too acute, as was evident even to the unsentimental mind of the merchant to allow of any attempt at consolation. A greyhound appeared to think differently, for he had placed his forepaws upon his young mistress' lap, and was attempting to lick her face in token of canine sympathy. The merchant paused irresolutely for a moment, and then ascending the broad starcase he pushed open the door of Harston's room and entered.

The blinds were drawn down and the chamber was very dark. A pungent whiff of disinfectants issued from it, mingled with the dank heavy smell of disease. The bed was in a far corner. Without seeing him, Girdlestone could hear the fast labored breathing of the invalid. A trimly dressed nurse who had been sitting by the bedside rose, and, recognizing the visitor, whispered a few words to him and left the room. He pulled the cord of the Venetian blind so as to admit a few rays of daylight. The great chamber looked dreary and bare, as carpet and hangings had been removed to lessen the chance of future infection. John Girdlestone stepped softly across to the bedside, and sat down by his dying friend.

The sufferer was lying on his back, apparently unconscious of all around him. His glazed eyes were turned upwards towards the ceiling, and his parched lips were parted, while the breath came in quick, spasmodic gasps. Even the unskilled eye of the merchant could tell that the angel of death was hovering very near him. With an ungainly attempt at tenderness, which had something pathetic in it, he moistened a sponge and passed it over the sick man's feverish brow. The latter turned his restless head round, and a gleam of recognition and gratitude came into his eyes.

"I knew you would come," he said.

"Yes, I came the moment that I got your message."

"I am glad that you are here," the sufferer continued with a sigh of relief. From the brightened expression upon his pinched face, it seemed as if, even now in the jaws of death, he leaned upon his old schoolfellow and looked to him for assistance. He put a wasted hand above the counterpane and laid it upon Girdlestone's.

"I wish to speak to you, John," he said. "I am very weak. Can you hear what I say?"

"Yes, I hear you."

"Give me a spoonful from that bottle. It clears my mind for a time. I have been making my will, John."

"Yes," said the merchant, replacing the medicine bottle.

"The lawyer made it this morning. Stoop your head and you will hear me better. I have less than fifty thousand dollars. I should have done better had I retired years ago."

"I told you so," the other broke in gruffly.

"You did—you did. But I acted for the best. Forty thousand I leave to my dear daughter Kate."

A look of interest came over Girdlestone's face. "How about the balance?" he asked.

"I leave that to be equally divided among the various London institutions for educating the poor. We were both poor boys ourselves, John, and we know the value of such schools."

Girdlestone looked perhaps a trifle disappointed. The sick man went on very slowly and painfully:

"My daughter will have forty thousand pounds. But it is so tied up that she can neither touch it herself nor enable anyone else to do so until she is of age. She has no friends, John, and no relations, save only my cousin, Dr. George Dimsdale. Never was a girl left more lonely and unprotected. Take her I beg of you, and bring her up under your own eye. Treat her as though she were your child. Guard her above all from those who would wreck her young life, in order to share her fortune. Do this, old friend, and make me happy on my deathbed."

The merchant made no answer. His heavy eyebrows were drawn down, and his forehead all puckered with thought.

"You are the one man," continued the sufferer, "whom I know to be just and upright. Give me the water, for my mouth is dry. Should, which God forbid, my dear girl perish before she marries, then——" His breath failed him for a moment, and he paused to recover it.

"Well, what then?"

"Then, old friend, her fortune reverts to you, for there is none who will use it so well. Those are the terms of the will. But you will guard her and care for her, as I would myself. She is a tender plant, John, too weak to grow alone. Promise me that you will do right by her—promise it?"

"I do promise it," John Girdlestone answered in a deep voice. He was standing up now and leaning over to catch the words of the dying man.

Harston was sinking rapidly. With a feeble motion he pointed to a brown backed volume upon the table.

"Take up the book," he said.

The merchant picked it up.

"Now, repeat after me, I swear and solemnly pledge myself——"

"I swear and solemnly pledge myself——"

"To treasure and guard as if she were my own——" came the tremulous voice from the bed.

"To treasure and guard as if she were my own——" in the deep bass of the merchant.

"Kate Harston, the daughter of my deceased friend——"

"Kate Harston, the daughter of my deceased friend——"

"And as I treat her so may my own flesh and blood treat me!"

"And as I treat her, so may my own flesh and blood treat me!"

The sick man's head fell back exhausted upon his pillow. "Thank God!" he explained, "now I can die in peace."

"Turn your mind from the vanities and dross of this world," John Girdlestone said sternly, "and fix it upon that which is eternal, and can never die."

"Are you going?" the invalid asked sadly, for he had taken up his hat and stick.

"Yes, I must go; I have an appointment in the City at six, which I must not miss."

"And I have an appointment which I must not miss," the dying man said with a feeble smile.

"I shall send up the nurse as I go down," Girdlestone said. "Goodbye!"

"Goodbye! God bless you, John!"

The firm strong hand of the hale man enclosed for a moment the feeble burning one of the sufferer. Then John Girdlestone plodded heavily down the stair, and these friends of forty years standing had said their last adieu.

The African merchant kept his appointment in the City, but long before he reached it John Harston had gone also to keep that last terrible appointment of which the messenger is death.

CHAPTER II.

It was a dull November morning. The murky air looked murkier still through the glazed office windows. Girdlestone, grim and grey, as though he were the very embodiment of the weather, stooped over his mahogany table. He had a long list in front of him, on which he was checking off, as a prelude to the day's work, the position in the market of the various speculations in which the capital of the firm was embarked. His son Ezra lounged in an easy chair opposite him, looking rather dishevelled and dark under the eyes, for he had been up half the night and the Nemesis of reaction was upon him.

"Faugh!" his father ejaculated, looking around at him with disgust. "You have been drinking already this morning."

"I took a brandy and seltzer on the way to the office," he answered carelessly. "I needed one to steady me."

"A young fellow of your age should not want steadying. You have a strong constitution, but you must not play tricks with it. You must have been very late last night. It was nearly one before I went to bed."

"I was playing cards with Major Clutterbuck and one or two others. We kept up rather late."

"With Major Clutterbuck?"

"Yes."

"I don't care about your consorting so much with that man. He drinks and gambles, and does you no good. What good has he ever done himself? Take care that he does not fleece you." The merchant felt instinctively, as he glanced at the shrewd, dark face of his son, that the warning was a superfluous one.

"No fear, father," Ezra answered sulkily. "I am old enough to choose my own friends."

"Why such a friend as that?"

"I like to know men of that class. You are a successful man, father, but you—well, you can't be much help to me socially. You need some one to show you the ropes, and the major is my man. When I can stand alone, I'll soon let him know it."

"Well, go your own way," said Girdlestone shortly. Hard to all the world, he was soft only in this one direction. From childhood every discussion between father and son had ended with the same words.

"It is business time," he resumed. "Let us confine ourselves to business. I see that Illinois was at 112 yesterday."

"They are at 113 this morning."

"What! have you been on Change already?"

"Yes, I dropped in there on my way to the office. I would hold on to those. They will go up for some days yet."

The senior partner made a pencil note on the margin of the list.

"We'll hold on to the cotton we have," he said.

"No, sell out at once," Ezra answered with decision. "I saw Featherstone of Liverpool, last night, or rather this morning. It was hard to make head or tail of what the fool said, but he let fall enough to show that there was likely to be a drop."

Girdlestone made another mark upon the paper. He never questioned his son's decisions now, for long experience had shown him that they were never formed without solid grounds. "Take this list Ezra," he said, handing him the paper, "and run your eye over it. If you see anything that wants changing mark it."

"I'll do it in the counting house," his son answered. "I can keep my eye on those lazy scamps of clerks. Gilday had no idea of keeping them in order." As he went out he cannoned against an elderly gentleman in a white waistcoat who was being shown in, and who ricochetted off him into the office, where he shook hands heartily with the elder Girdlestone. It was evident from the labored cordiality of the latter's greeting that the newcomer was a man of some importance. He was, indeed, none other than the well known philanthropist, Mr. Jefferson Edwards, M. P. for Middlehurst, whose name upon a bill was hardly second to that of Rothschild.

"How do, Girdlestone, How do?" he exclaimed, mopping his face with his handkerchief. He was a fussy little man, with a brusque, nervous manner. "Hard at it as usual, eh? Always pegging away. Wonderful man. Ha, Ha! Wonderful!"

"You look warm," the merchant answered, rubbing his hands. "Let me offer you some claret. I have some in the cupboard."

(Continued Next Week.)

This story will run for about three months. In a few weeks a new serial will be started. Watch for it.